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## A Good Man Down

**In Parkersburg, Iowa, it was a high school coach who led the townspeople out of the rubble of a tornado, showed them how to live a Christian life and brought honor to a football field he mowed himself. What they can't understand is why Ed Thomas was gunned down by a former player**

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<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1157377/index.htm>

**Bob Smeins** lives on the hillside overlooking Iowa's other field of dreams. On Friday nights in the fall Smeins has always liked to sit on his deck and watch the Aplington-Parkersburg High Falcons play football. The rest of the year, he liked to sit on his deck and watch a legend tend to the grass. It has been called the Carpet, the Sacred Acre and, officially, Ed Thomas Field, after the 58-year-old coach who laid down the sod. Thomas walked that field every morning, yanking weeds, killing dandelions, fertilizing the soil, kneeling down to study blades of grass for dreaded brown spots—the surest sign of chemical imbalance. Before the school installed sprinklers, Thomas carried a hose. After the school hired custodians for the field, Thomas still insisted on mowing it himself, against the grain from the goal line to the five-yard line, with the grain from the five to the 10 and so on, just like groundskeepers did it in the pros. "I would wave to him down there sometimes," says Smeins, a 76-year-old retiree, "and he wouldn't wave back. He was so focused on that field. It was his life."

The football team was allowed to run on the field but never walk. Others were allowed to run on the track that encircles the field, but never on the field itself. During track meets, Thomas strung a rope around the field, in case opposing teams did not know the rules. "It's probably the best field in the state," said Aplington-Parkersburg High principal Dave Meyer, "except maybe for the University of Iowa." The field has standard-issue metal bleachers, no box office, no fancy scoreboard. What makes it special, what makes it sacred, is the love that Thomas poured into the turf.

Last Friday morning, though, the field was looking a little neglected. No one was mowing the grass. No one was picking the weeds. A few troublesome mushrooms had invaded the sidelines. So Smeins did what he knew Thomas would have done. He went down from his house on the

hill, and in his sneakers and straw hat, he walked into the long red barn with the white roof that stands just behind the football field. The barn was intended to store school buses, but it was used this year as a temporary weight room. That's where Thomas kept the big orange lawn mower he used to cut the grass. It's also where he was shot and killed two days earlier.

**Parkersburg sits** among the cornfields, soybean farms and silos of northern Iowa. It's one of many small towns in this state that seem to be left over from another era. Patrons at the Kwik Star are allowed to pump their gas *before* they pay. Men at Tom's Barber Shop hang out and chat after they get their buzz cuts. Some residents say they have not locked their doors since the 1980s, which is understandable, considering that until last week there had not been a murder here since the '20s. Parkersburg is a place where an upstanding person is usually described as a good Christian and an out-of-towner is asked, in the most casual way possible, what religion he practices. But even people in Parkersburg are having a hard time wrapping their faith around what God has wrought in the past 13 months.

On May 25, 2008, a tornado with winds exceeding 200 mph cut a hole three quarters of a mile wide in the heart of Parkersburg, killing eight people, destroying 220 homes and leveling the high school campus. Then, just this past week, on June 24, the most recognized figure in town was gunned down, allegedly by a 24-year-old Aplington-Parkersburg graduate named Mark Becker, who played football for Thomas; whose father, Dave, played football for Thomas; and whose younger brother, Scott, is currently on the team. Dave and his wife, Joan, attend First Congregational Church, same as the Thomases, and Joan had spoken at Sunday school on June 21 about the demons her son was struggling with. Thomas, who had counseled Mark Becker in the past, bowed his head and prayed for him.

"Getting hit back-to-back like we have—one year and then the next—it just doesn't seem fair," said Alex Hornbuckle, the Falcons' star running back. "I keep asking, Why? Why does this keep happening to us?"

Thomas delivered sermons when ministers were away. He consoled husbands whose wives were ill. He presented baby boys with FUTURE FALCON certificates. He taught kids to play football, sure, but he also taught driver's ed, making his students learn behind the wheel of a John Deere mower before he gave them keys to a car. He worked every day but Christmas, except this year, when he took a vacation to Hawaii and complained that he could not relax. In 37 seasons he won 292 games, most of them four yards at a time, with his old-fashioned wing T offense. The Falcons were never particularly big or fast, and they rarely threw, but they were disciplined, conditioned and country-strong. Before every play they would sprint to the line of scrimmage and try to snap the ball before the defense was set. When Thomas sensed a touchdown, he would call out, "Take it to the barn!" in his high-pitched howl, wire-rimmed glasses bouncing on the bridge of his nose.

Thomas won two state titles and coached four current NFL players, which is stunning when you consider that there are only 1,900 people in all of Parkersburg. Everyone in town, it seems, either played for Thomas or has a relative who did. Of the 220 students now at the school, 90 are on the football team. Even Jeff Jacobson, a special agent working the Thomas murder case for the Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation, is a former booster whose son, Andy, played for Thomas.

"You know how the Bible says to build your house on the rock?" said Chris Luhring, the Parkersburg police chief, who played for Thomas. "He was the rock that this community was built on."

The night Thomas died, 2,500 people showed up at the field for a vigil, including some of his staunchest opponents. "He could beat you 42--0 without demoralizing you," said Bruce Wall, coach of Jessup High.

On the fence surrounding the practice field, dozens of red Dixie cups were shoved between chain links to spell out COACH T., followed by a heart. In the windows of a house on Fourth Street, handwritten signs read WE WILL MISS U COACH and GOD BE WITH THE THOMASES. At First Congregational Church a message hung on the door: THE SANCTUARY IS OPEN FOR PRAYER. Parents of players struggled to talk to their sons, and the sons struggled to talk at all. "Stanley won't speak to me, and I don't know what to say to him," John Tuve said of his son, who is a rising senior wide receiver and defensive back.

Last year, when the tornado struck, people could pound nails into two-by-fours, using hard labor as a coping mechanism. "That was easier," said assistant coach Brian Benning. "This year it's all inside of you."

The day that part of Parkersburg blew away, Thomas huddled in the basement of his house off Highway 57, holding hands with his wife, Jan, and listening to the wood splinter over his head. The tornado needed only 34 seconds to do its damage, and when Thomas emerged from the basement, he found nothing of his house left. He walked through the destruction, down the two-lane highway, toward his second home. Neighbors looking for direction followed behind. When Thomas got to the edge of the field, he stared at the mangled bleachers, the twisted uprights, the Sacred Acre punctured by wood and glass. Standing next to Principal Meyer the next morning, he pledged to rebuild the field in time for the 2008 season opener, setting an example for everyone else who was displaced. "That field," said Jacksonville Jaguars center Brad Meester, Aplington-Parkersburg class of 1995, "is what brought the town back together."

While Thomas sent his players to dig graves for the dead, players from rival high schools arrived in Parkersburg by the busload, dropping to their knees and crawling across the field to pick up shards of glass. John Tuve generously paved the horseback-riding arena on his property and turned it into a makeshift weight room, and the University of Iowa football team came from Iowa City, 110 miles away, to set up the equipment. Thomas consulted with David Minner, a horticulture professor at Iowa State, to find the perfect type of grass and settled on a hybrid tall fescue. He laid the sod before the 2008 season, just as he said he would, and the Falcons went 11--1.

Thomas's vision to resuscitate his football field and in turn his town was gradually fulfilled. New houses, including Thomas's, with a small fish pond in the backyard, sprouted along Highway 57. The high school, which had moved classes into the middle school in Aplington, five miles away, announced that it would reopen its campus on Aug. 15. During a banquet this past May honoring the athletes of the week selected by a local TV station, Thomas beamed as he discussed the

previous year. "It's amazing," he said, "how you bond together when you face adversity in your life." This promised to be a glorious summer in Parkersburg.

"Now I actually think the devastation might be worse," said Mary Schwennen, whose three daughters graduated from Aplington-Parkersburg. "Sure, my home's not gone. My belongings are not gone. But those are things. This is a life. Our sense of safety will never be the same."

**Thomas did** his last piece of coaching at 7:45 a.m. on June 24, overseeing a morning weightlifting session for about 20 students, most of them freshman and sophomore football players, but also a few members of the girls' volleyball team. Thomas stood next to Brandon Simkins, a promising running back and defensive back who will be a sophomore next season and might, Thomas thought, make the varsity. Brandon reported to Thomas that he had bench-pressed 265 pounds, which entitled him to a coveted FALCON POWER T-shirt. As they talked, Brandon said he'd seen Mark Becker stumble into the weight room in a dark blue jumpsuit that made him look sort of like a construction worker. Becker had come to lift before, so Brandon thought nothing more of it.

Suddenly Becker reached into his jumpsuit, grabbed a gun and pointed it in the direction of Brandon and Thomas. Brandon had no idea whether the gun was aimed at him or his coach. He took a step back, closed his eyes and dropped his head. "I was dead," he said later. But Becker had been looking for Thomas, Principal Meyer would say later. He had already gone to the middle-school campus, where the coach had a classroom in which he taught social studies, and the elementary school, where he taught driving.

Brandon heard a loud bang, which sounded like a heavy barbell plate being dropped. Then he opened his eyes and saw his coach, the one he had dreamed of playing for, falling to the ground. Students bolted for the door, tripping over each other as they fled from the room. "I was trying to pick up kids and throw them out the door," Brandon would say. After they got out, he punched the door closed, hitting it so hard he bruised his fist. "The police asked me to draw everything I saw," Brandon said. "I couldn't do it because my hand was still shaking."

Parkersburg yearns to understand why anybody would have wanted to kill its most beloved citizen—"Our icon," says barber Tom Teeple—but the closest thing to an explanation may be something that, according to Brandon, Becker told a volleyball player as he left the room: "The devil made me do this." Becker, who was an above-average linebacker ("tough son of a gun," Teeple remembers), graduated in 2004, enrolled at nearby Wartburg College and played junior varsity football there. But he dropped out after one semester, according to Wartburg spokesman Saul Shapiro, and later enrolled in and dropped out of Hawkeye Community College in Waterloo. According to reports, Becker was arrested for assault in November, for criminal mischief in December and for possession of drug paraphernalia in January, when he admitted to police that he was a methamphetamine user.

Becker worked as a cook at the Old Chicago pizza restaurant in Cedar Falls—"We had no problems with him," said manager Scott Gilroy—until June 20, the day he allegedly broke into a house in Cedar Falls and took a baseball bat to the windows. Becker then led police on a high-speed chase, which ended when his car hit a deer six miles north of Parkersburg. The Butler

County sheriff's office sent him to Covenant Medical Center in Waterloo, where he was admitted to the psychiatric ward. Butler County sheriff Jason Johnson said he asked to be informed when Becker was released, but Covenant Medical Center claimed in a statement that no such request was filed.

Becker was released on June 23. The next day he was charged with first-degree murder after Thomas died at Covenant Medical Center, and Parkersburg was left to wonder whether its coach was gone because of a terrible case of miscommunication.

**The people** of Parkersburg will remind you that being a good Christian means being able to forgive—even the family of an accused killer. Two days after the shooting, Joan Becker got out of her car in front of the Thomas house, and by the time she reached the stoop she was weeping. The door opened and she was welcomed inside. "We need to pray for the Beckers too," said Todd Thomas, 28, the younger of the coach's two sons. "They need just as much support as we do."

While the Beckers may be judged outside Parkersburg, within its borders they are portrayed as a model family that did everything possible for a wayward son. Mary Schwennen said she plans to cook meals for the Beckers in addition to the Thomases. "We don't blame them for this at all," said Aplington-Parkersburg superintendent Jon Thompson. "We send them nothing but our best. I know it might seem strange, all the support they're getting here, but it feels right to us."

Scott Becker, a senior who will help anchor the Falcons' offensive line, was back to hanging out with teammates late last week, playing video games in the basement of John Tuve's house. Scott was one of Coach Thomas's favorites, polite and unassuming, the player the coach tabbed this year to escort a potential transfer around campus. "It doesn't have to be awkward," said Alex Hornbuckle, the running back. "We're all trying to act normal—as normal as possible. Scott can't think any of this is his fault." The school has already taken one essential step, closing the red barn and moving the weight room back to John Tuve's horse-riding arena.

If Coach Thomas was the one who rallied Parkersburg after the tornado, then who will galvanize the town now? The day Thomas died, when his family returned to the house, they were greeted by Denver Broncos center Casey Wiegmann. Wiegmann played for Thomas, as did Green Bay Packers defensive end Aaron Kampman, who arranged for Todd Thomas to fly home early from a vacation in Jamaica. Detroit Lions defensive end Jared DeVries, another Aplington-Parkersburg grad, stopped by the Thomas house last week, and Brad Meester arrived on Sunday night. All four NFL players from the area served as pallbearers at the funeral on Monday morning.

Next season the Falcons will have co--head coaches, Al Kerns in charge of offense, Jon Wiegmann in charge of defense. Kerns is a fiery motivator, Wiegmann a savvy strategist. But the person who will get the players through the summer and fall is still Ed Thomas. What he preached last season—in the words of Brandon Simkins, "To suck it up and go"—is applicable once again. When Thomas's older son, Aaron, met with the team last week, he told players to seek help if they needed it. But he also told them, "Don't use this as an excuse. Nothing is

changing here." Aaron is a basketball coach at Union High in LaPorte City, Iowa, and his message was not so different from the one his father delivered in the wake of the tornado.

When Aaron and Todd walk the field in the morning, they pick weeds. They look for mushrooms. Aaron was the one who, about four hours after his father died, went up the hillside to ask Bob Smeins if he could take over mowing duties. Smeins, who filled in for Coach Thomas in the past and knows as well as anyone how he wanted his field, was flattered. So last Friday, in his straw hat and sneakers, with Montgomery Gentry blaring from the radio, he took a seat on the big orange lawn mower, revved the engine and started to cut a path back to normal.